

What Do We Mean by “Women and Power”?

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OVER THE COURSE of the past two decades, historians of medieval women and gender have called into question many of our previously held assumptions about women's power, challenging the implication that women's association with the private sphere should be equated with a lack of power, and opening up consideration of informal means of wielding public power alongside more formal institutional structures.¹ Yet agreement on a definition for the key term of “power” itself has been more problematic. In 1988, Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski introduced their collection *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* by defining power as “the ability to act effectively, to influence people or decisions, and to achieve goals.”² Almost a decade later, in 1995, Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean proposed a slightly broader definition—“the strategies individual women used to negotiate the accepted concepts and practices of society at large”³—that invited historians to consider cultural practices as well as the political, social, and economic structures implied by the first definition. By the early 2000s, however, both of these definitions had been in large part subsumed into the concept of “agency” (another contested term), and what was left was increasingly problematic, especially in light of theoretical approaches that had historians turning away from the individual

1. Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds. *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 1-13; Jennifer Carpenter and Sally-Beth MacLean, eds. *Power of the Weak: Studies on Medieval Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), xi-xiv.

2. Erler and Kowaleski, *Women and Power*, 2.

3. Carpenter and MacLean, *Power of the Weak*, xi.

agent to focus on the broader structures in which power was embedded: confession, hagiography, family, political ritual, and even domestic architecture.⁴

These few brief examples should serve to illustrate that, while we like to talk and research and write about “women and power,” we may not necessarily be talking about the same thing. With that in mind, I would like to use my space in this roundtable to address the question of what we actually *mean* when we talk about “women and power.” To what degree is our understanding of women’s power in the Middle Ages conditioned by the way we frame our questions? First, I’ll discuss how we might be addressing the relationship of women and power in the classic sense of women’s public power (generally equated with queenship or female lordship). As this roundtable includes scholars much more expert than I on the subject of queenship or female lordship, I will limit my comments in this first section, devoting the majority of this brief paper to an examination of how we might broaden the scope of our question by redefining “power” in a way that invites more gender analysis.

Despite the discussions around defining the issue of power, the term has tended to be associated with the exercise of public authority, in the broadest possible sense of that phrase. While our use of the terminology has sometimes encompassed women’s public actions in village or city life,⁵ the focus for many decades has been what we might call “political” women: aristocratic women and most especially queens.⁶ The biographies that historians produced of women like Eleanor of Aquitaine emphasized—in a positive way—the achievements of these exceptional women in the implicitly male world of public power.⁷ But “exceptional”

4. Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, eds., *Gendering the Master Narrative, Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1–16.

5. For example, Erler and Kowaleski’s 1988 *Women and Power* volume contains an essay by Judith M. Bennett entitled “Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside,” in Erler and Kowaleski, *Women and Power*, 18–36.

6. Judith Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 6–7 and 23–24.

7. In the English-language scholarship, perhaps no medieval queen exemplifies this “exceptional woman” treatment better than Eleanor of Aquitaine. The two classic biographies of this type are Amy Kelly’s fairly romanticized *Eleanor of Aquitaine and*

is a double-edged sword: the lives of such woman worthies as told in these biographies were self-contained, their exceptional nature subtly highlighting the notion that most other queens and aristocratic women were wives and mothers whose power was borrowed or reflected, rather than their own. The 1980s, however, saw the field of inquiry open up as scholars turned from the study of individual powerful women to the study of queens' power more generally. This shift was long and slow and might be bracketed by the publication of two books. The first, Pauline Stafford's 1983 *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages*, still analyzed queens' power solely in relation to that of their husbands, but was clearly more interested in the patterns of women's power, rather than the province of a few exceptional women.⁸ The second, the 1993 essay collection edited by John Carmi Parsons, *Medieval Queenship*, notably eschewed studies of individual queens in favor of essays on regional ideas of queenship (Hungary, Denmark, León and Navarre) or central features of queenly power like regency.⁹

The nature of the shift that took place over the course of the decade between Stafford and Parsons is evident in the titles of the two books: by 1993 at the latest, "queenship" had replaced "queen" as the primary subject of analysis.¹⁰ Queens' power was no longer merely on loan from their husbands and fathers; it had broadened to encompass property

the Four Kings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950) and D. D. R. Owen's more skeptical but no less strictly biographical *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen and Legend* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993). These works have been followed by a steady stream of biographies for audiences both popular (Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1999]) and scholarly (Ralph V. Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France, Queen of England*. [New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 2009]).

8. Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens,: University of Georgia Press, 1983).

9. John Carmi Parsons, *Medieval Queenship* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press, 1993)—possibly marking the point that the long, slow turn begun by Stafford had been completed, and "queenship" had replaced "queen" as the primary subject of analysis.

10. As Lois Huneycutt points out in her essay, "queenship" first appeared as a category in the International Medieval Bibliography in 1987—almost precisely at the halfway point between Stafford's and Parsons's books.

and income, religious and artistic patronage, status as mothers, and ways in which queens' actions were commemorated in literature, art, and official histories (or, to put it alliteratively: property, patronage, parentage, and posterity).¹¹ And while individual researchers have lately returned to a focus on individual figures, the works of the last couple of decades are a far cry from the "exceptional woman" biographies of old. Earlier in this roundtable, Penny Nash exhorted us to "go beyond the life cycle." Queenship scholars who have done just that—see, for example, Lois Huneycutt's recent biography of the English Queen Matilda of

11. Even restricting ourselves to English-language publications since 1983, the literature on any single one of these subfields of queenship studies is vast. I present here merely a sampling. For studies on the intersection of queenly power with material resources, property, and income: Attila Bárány, "Medieval Queens and Queenship: A Retrospective on Income and Power," *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU* 19 (2013): 149–200; Ana Maria S. A. Rodrigues and Manuela Santos Silva, "Private Properties, Seigniorial Tributes, and Jurisdictional Rents: The Income of the Queens of Portugal in the Late Middle Ages," in *Women and Wealth in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Theresa Earenfight, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 209–28; Elizabeth Casteen, "Sex and Politics in Naples: the Regnant Queenship of Johanna I," *Journal of the Historical Society* 11, no. 2 (2011): 183–210, doi:10.1111/j.1540-5923.2011.00329.x. For religious patronage: Helen A. Gaudette, "The Spending Power of a Crusader Queen: Melisende of Jerusalem," in Earenfight, 135–48; Kathleen Hapgood Thompson, "Queen Adeliza and the Lotharingian Connection," *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 140 (2003): 57–64. For maternity as a factor in queens' power: Mark Whittow, "Motherhood and Power in Early Medieval Europe, West and East: The Strange Case of the Empress Eirene," in *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*, ed. Conrad Leyser and Lesley Smith (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 55–84; Bethany Aram, "Authority and Maternity in Late Medieval Castile: Four Queens Regent," in *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, ed. Brenda Bolton and Christine Meek (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 121–29. For the way that queens' legacies were constructed after their deaths (for good or for ill): Patricia Ann Lee, "Reflections of Power: Margaret of Anjou and the Dark Side of Queenship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1986): 183–217, doi:10.2307/2862114; Kathleen Nolan, "The Queen's Body and Institutional Memory: The Tomb of Adelaide of Maurienne," *Memory and the Medieval Tomb*, ed. Elizabeth Valdez del Alamo and Carol Stamatidis Pendergast (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 249–67. See also the recent collection of essays edited by Elena Woodacre, *Queenship in the Mediterranean: Negotiating the Role of the Queen in the Medieval and Early Modern Eras* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Scotland—have been able to challenge the link between queens' power and that of their husbands and sons.¹² John Carmi Parsons likewise focused on queens' independent sources of power by tracing Queen Eleanor of Castile's efforts to build a network in the foreign land to which marriage had transplanted her; she forged independent sources of power in a way that defied gender conventions of wifely subjection.¹³ Janna Bianchini's study of Queen Berenguela of Castile focuses on the "practice of power" on display in Berenguela's reign, with attention to how the particular context of Reconquest monarchy overlapped with the more general frameworks of gender and patriarchy to create a distinctly Iberian queenship.¹⁴

The queens of these more recent books and articles stand not just for themselves but also for one of the ongoing threads in the queenship discussion—usually something about power, broadly construed.¹⁵ But though queenship scholars have been at the forefront of the women-and-power discussion, their insights have unfortunately gained little traction in larger discussions of political power and authority, which have continued to be gendered male. For our studies of women and power to have resonance beyond ourselves, we ought to challenge ourselves to think about how we might embark on what Dyan Elliott referred to as the "third age" of Joan Scott, in which gender analysis might be

12. Lois L. Huneycutt, *Matilda of Scotland: A Study in Medieval Queenship* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003).

13. John Carmi Parsons, *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth-Century England* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1995).

14. Janna Bianchini, *The Queen's Hand: Power and Authority in the Reign of Berenguela of Castile* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

15. We should also note that something similar might be said of the smaller number of studies on female lords and lordship below the level of queens: see Fredric Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), Theodore Evergates, ed., *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), and Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000–1200* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010). This focus in the English-language scholarship on aristocratic Frenchwomen in positions of power is particularly noteworthy, given the persistence of Georges Duby's image of aristocratic women as pawns in their male relations' power maneuvers.

turned to illuminate a broader range of historical inquiry.¹⁶ Two recent examples of how this might work come from the study of late medieval Aragonese queenship: Núria Silleras-Fernández's biography of Queen Maria de Luna, wife of Martin I (r. 1396–1410), and Theresa Earenfight's *The Queen's Other Body*, a study of the political life of María of Castile, wife of the fifteenth-century King Alfonso V.¹⁷ Both of these books are, in one sense, studies of individual queens, but their careers are framed in terms of questions of monarchy and rulership more generally. In these books, gender and queenship become means to open up the study of power politics to include women, not just as queens but as rulers. The fact that both of these queens ruled as lieutenant (an office that had long served as a training ground for Aragonese kings-in-waiting) rather than as queens-regent contradicts the idea that queens' power necessarily declined with the rise of bureaucratic/institutional monarchy in the high and later Middle Ages. Both of these books, in my reading, are less studies of medieval queenship than of medieval *monarchy* and institutions of power; they each just happen to have a female figure at their center. Such books stand as a challenge to us to keep up our efforts to speak to broader audiences, and to think, write, and speak—loudly and at length—about how our studies of powerful women might illuminate areas of inquiry long gendered male.

This brings me to my second proposal: that we broaden the scope of our inquiries into women and power to include more quotidian exercises of power by women. Those of us who came of age, academically speaking, in an intellectual climate in which the power theories of Foucault (like Foucauldian power itself) permeated our environment have rarely thought of power as a unidirectional thing, much less something *necessarily* belonging to one set of public institutions. Yet our discussions of “women and power” have focused almost exclusively on public power,

16. See Dyan Elliott, “The Three Ages of Joan Scott,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1390–1403, esp. 1391–92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30223448>.

17. Núria Silleras-Fernández, *Power, Piety, and Patronage in Late Medieval Queenship: Maria De Luna* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Theresa Earenfight, *The King's Other Body: Maria of Castile and the Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

and thus the power of (relatively) elite women. Non-elite women in our books and articles might exercise agency, but we have unconsciously treated women's power as a far narrower category. But what if it weren't so narrow? Just as we broadly define agency as the ability to take action that has the potential to affect one's own destiny, then *we might construct a parallel definition of "power" as the ability to take action that has the potential to affect the destiny of others*—with "action" necessarily including the accessing or wielding of narratives that tap into more diffuse power-bearing structures as well as more concrete acts in the social, economic, and political realms.

The essence of this ad hoc definition is the lack of focus on formally constituted institutions as the only area in which we look for women's power. I'm certainly not the first to suggest some version of this for the study of medieval women. As usual, scholars in queenship studies have been at the forefront, as they are the ones who have had to think most deeply about the problem. In her biography of Margaret of Anjou, Helen Maurer defined power as something that may be broader than institutional or formal structures; an "ability to gain compliance" that could range from influence/persuasion to force.¹⁸ Mark Whittow noted in his study of the Byzantine Empress Eirene that "Power in any society comes in a variety of forms, and ranges from the highly circumscribed [...] to the acknowledged leadership of peoples and states."¹⁹ This call to break down the equation of power with the formal institutions designed for its exercise—without, I might interject, falling into the essentialist assumption of *informal power:female::formal power:male*—may point the way to how we might proceed, as historians of women, to take "women and power" in new directions.

Read in this broad way, there are many avenues for studying expressions of power outside of formal political authority, sometimes in unlooked-for places. My own primary graduate training was not in women's or gender history but in legal history, an area of study that is arguably even more male-gendered than the studies of politics and institutions that tend to dominate discussions of power in history. Women's

18. Helen Maurer, *Margaret of Anjou: Queenship and Power in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003), 5.

19. Whittow, "Motherhood and Power in Early Medieval Europe," 56.

interaction with the legal system, not to mention the many things that male legal professionals had to say *about* women, have made legal materials a rich source for historians of women and gender, allowing them to explore women's relative agency in medieval society. But in terms of the power dynamics of the law, while women might "negotiate" status or "work" the law (to use two terms popular in book and article titles from the last fifteen years or so), the governing assumption has been that the power to affect the destinies of others lay in the hands of the lawyers, legislators and commentators, notaries, and other assorted legal professionals, all of whom, in the Middle Ages, were male. The power construed here is unidirectional, and vested in legal institutions and the men who served in them. Adopting the broader definition of power that I suggest above, however, has the potential to reveal a bit more to the story. Certainly, there are numerous cases of women whose legal actions have only the power to affect their own outcomes, and there are even more who seem to simply be acted *upon* by the legal system. But what about the woman who enters into a conspiracy with her husband to sue him for return of her dowry in order to protect the marital property from creditors?²⁰ Or the woman who petitions the royal courts to have the gamblers, prostitutes, and assorted ruffians run out of her neighborhood, confident that the courts will side with her argument that the proximity of this "bad element" endangers her own feminine virtue?²¹ These women, and others like them, engaged with legal ideas and institutions out of self-interest, and so we say that they are exercising agency within a male-dominated context. But I would argue that they are also engaged in an exercise of power, because they set out with the intention of affecting someone else. They are, in fact, embedded agents of the diffuse structures of power that the postmodernist theorists have asked us to consider.

20. Julius Kirshner, "Wives' Claims against Insolvent Husbands in Late Medieval Italy," in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. Julius Kirshner and Suzanne Fonay Wemple (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 256–303; Marie A. Kelleher, "Hers by Right: Gendered Legal Assumptions and Women's Property in the Medieval Crown of Aragon," *Journal of Women's History* 22, no. 2 (2010): 34–55, doi: 10.1353/jowh.0.0158.

21. Marie A. Kelleher, *Measure of Woman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), esp. 103–4.

Looking at power in this way has the additional benefit of letting us imagine a broader group of women as agents of power. This expanded definition of power is implicit in the recent scholarship on priests' concubines, some of whom apparently held places of influence in the parish community that they reinforced in a performative fashion when they hosted dinners at the parish priest's home, rang the church bells, or prepared the sacramental host and oil for the church.²² A broad approach to power could also take in the small but growing field of inquiry into the lives of Jewish and Muslim women in Christian context. As Lois Huneycutt suggested earlier in this roundtable, our study of women and power has tended to generalize from the example of Latin Christian women, and should be expanded. I would only add that we need to be aware of methodological differences, because much of what we have available to us about these two groups of women comes from Christian sources; the English-language treatments of Jewish and Muslim women have tended to portray them in terms of family/life-cycle portraits or (in the case of Muslim women in medieval western Europe) as slaves.²³ To break out of this methodological bind, we might consult recent feminist writing on intersectionality, which could potentially illuminate the layered power structures in which subaltern women were embedded. There

22. Michelle Armstrong-Partida, "Priestly Wives: The Role and Acceptance of Clerics' Concubines in the Parishes of Late Medieval Catalunya," *Speculum* 88, no. 1 (2013): 166-214, doi:10.1017/S0038713413000535; Daniel E. Bornstein, "Parish Priests in Late Medieval Cortona: The Urban and Rural Clergy," in *Quaderni di Storia Religiosa* 4 (1997): 165-93; M[arie] A. Kelleher, "'Like Man and Wife': Clerics' Concubines in the Diocese of Barcelona," *Journal of Medieval History* 28, no. 4 (2002): 349-60, doi: 10.1016/S0304-4181(02)00041-6. For an alternative position on the relative power/powerlessness of clerics' concubines, see Roisin Cossar, "Clerical 'Concubines' in Northern Italy During the Fourteenth Century," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 1 (2011): 110-31, doi: 10.1353/jowh.2011.0003.

23. Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Rebecca Lynn Winer, *Women, Wealth, and Community in Perpignan, c. 1250-1300: Christians, Jews, and Enslaved Muslims in a Medieval Mediterranean Town* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006). See also the intriguing texts in Louise Mirrer, "Of Muslim Princesses and Deceived Young Muslim Women" and "The Beautiful Jewess," chaps. in *Women, Jews, and Muslims in the Texts of Reconquest Castile* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 17-30 and 31-44, respectively.

have already been a few studies that suggest ways in which such women might have wielded power, according to the expanded definition above. In some cases, the exercise of power is clearly tied to women's bodies, as in the cases of slave women impregnated by their owners who used the legal system to agitate for better circumstances for themselves or (more commonly) their children.²⁴ The scholarship of early modernist historians working in the textually rich archives of the Inquisition to uncover the lives of *moriscas* and *conversas* in Iberia, Italy, and elsewhere suggests yet another potentially productive direction for future research by medievalists. Mary Elizabeth Perry especially has offered an intriguing possibility in the notion of "dangerous domesticity": the idea that women in these minority communities were conduits for the transmission of Jewish or *mudéjar* culture (if not religion) from one generation to the next, especially in terms of food practices.²⁵ Olivia Remie Constable had just begun to explore these for the Middle Ages at the time of her premature death;²⁶ hopefully other scholars will take up the baton. In all these cases—the concubines, the Jewish women, the *mudéjares* and *moriscas*—accessed narratives of power in their own embodied efforts to exercise individual power: to preserve and transmit culture to the next generation, to challenge structures of authority in a slave society, to become a figure of influence in a small mountain parish. Finally—and perhaps more tenuously—we might even consider women's strategic choices to litigate in terms of prevailing gender ideas of women's weakness as an exercise of power, however unintentional, in that each piece of litigation helped to transform a medieval theory of gender into a reality with a far-reaching legacy.

24. Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars: Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 172–91.

25. Mary Elizabeth Perry, *The Handless Maiden: Moriscos and the Politics of Religion in Early Modern Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

26. Olivia Remie Constable, "Food and Meaning: Christian Understandings of Muslim Food and Food Ways in Spain, 1250–1550," *Viator* 44, no. 3 (2013): 199–235, doi:1484/J.VIATOR.1.103484. It should be noted that Constable's main focus in this article was the religious dimension of food; women's roles are only a passing mention for her, but in conversation she had expressed interest in the gender aspects of this line of questioning.

Here I must pause, aware as I am that this final example may stretch our definition of power past the point where we're comfortable using the term. But I will let it stand, at least provisionally, because it raises a final point that I think we would do well to consider as we frame our analyses: women's power need not necessarily offer "more" or "better" for women in order to be considered "power." This, I would argue, is a major blind spot that we as historians of women and gender need to address. Because the long-term cumulative effect of these women's litigation was negative for women by our standards, we tend to filter it out, looking for a notion of women's power that aligns with our own modern feminist sensibilities. By doing so, however, we may be overlooking a great deal of how women's power was expressed—embedded as those expressions were in patriarchal political and cultural structures. Likewise, as feminist historians we may be hesitant to embark upon research trajectories in which women's expressions of power play into negative gender stereotypes. The figure of the "scold" or "gossip" who defamed her neighbors in the streets and in the courts, for example, certainly belongs to misogynist tropes both medieval and modern. Yet an examination of women whose public speech was meant to harm others can tell us a great deal about women's place at the nexus of social and legal networks.²⁷ Our protagonists need not be heroes. The power to harm is as worthy of investigation as any other field of women's power, and we shy away from it only to our own detriment.

I'd like to conclude this mini-festo by introducing a lingering reservation of my own about what I have proposed here. If we expand our definition of power to encompass just about everything, then might we end with it meaning nothing? This is no idle question. Historians of women and gender have recently been engaged in one of the field's periodic reevaluations of how our favorite bits of intellectual shorthand can sometimes obscure as much as they illuminate. At a recent (and standing-room-only) panel at the 2014 Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, feminist historians challenged our uncritical use of terms as widespread as "gender binary" (Anna Krylova), "gender crisis"

27. Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

(Mary Louise Roberts), and even that perennial favorite, “agency” (Lynn M. Thomas).²⁸ We ought to subject our explorations of “women and power” to equally clear-eyed scrutiny as we go forward.

Nevertheless, if historians are going to continue to use the term for the time being, why should we work only with a definition that excludes most women altogether? It is my hope that by thoughtfully expanding our definition to encompass more quotidian expressions of women’s power, as well as by looking for ways in which more public/political exercise of power by women might illuminate fields of history usually gendered male, all the while keeping a weather eye to the usefulness of our terminology, we have the opportunity to enrich not just the study of women and gender but the field and practice of history more generally.

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28. Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, 2014 program “Losing their Edge? A Critical Evaluation of Key Analytic Concepts in Gender History,” accessed December 7, 2015, https://berks2014.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/berkshire_program_forweb.pdf, p. 80.